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ABSTRACT

While advocates of guided imagery practice in the classroom fear most that inexperienced practitioners will abandon this effective means of developing metacognitive skills because students will not use imagery properly or because they themselves have not had the opportunity to learn guiding techniques from in-services or mentoring, the real threat to the success of creative visualization comes not from within. Because guided imagery encourages students to use their own imaginations and because Fundamentalist Christianity frequently "takes a dim view" of any educational theory that advocates getting inside children's minds, guided imagery has become particularly suspect in areas whose prevailing philosophy is that public schools are anti-religious in their promoting of critical-thinking activities. South Carolina, whose population has traditionally been homogeneous and the religious dogma overwhelmingly Christian and conservative, undertook to banish the use of guided imagery from statewide curricula. While there is a degree of solace to be taken from the bill's failure to pass the state legislature, there is, as well, a suspicion that certain forms of censorship, though never officially sanctioned, have been put into practice. (Contains 8 references.) (RS)

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TEACHING ENGLISH THE "RIGHT" WAY IN SOUTH CAROLINA:

FINDING A MIDDLE GROUND IN CENSORSHIP ISSUES

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When I opened up a discussion on censorship in early 1997, in a pedagogically oriented literature class at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina, I intended to review a list of banned, threatened, or censored books and to address how to compose a rationale. Someone in the classroom quietly informed us that a Language Arts teacher in nearby Ft. Mill (former home of Jim and Tammy Bakker's PTL organization) had been threatened with dismissal for employing a technique known as creative visualization or guided imagery during a creative writing exercise. This comment invited yet more examples of personal experiences in which the students' former high school teachers had either avoided the practice or initiated this teaching method, only to abandon it quite suddenly. The slight digression from the topic at hand prompted my investigation of the merits of and challenges to the teaching technique, which has apparently met with a considerable degree of disapproval in the state of South Carolina, and observably in the Upcountry, where our university is located and where we send out a large number of Secondary Education English interns.

An essay entitled "School Censorship Experiences of Teachers in Southern Appalachia, " describes barriers frequently encountered by public school teachers in a region that is geographically and philosophically close to upstate South Carolina. The north central counties of South Carolina, once isolated and insular, border the expanding metropolitan area of Charlotte, NC, a city that proclaims itself the "New South." And the westernmost counties of the state now play host to international companies and a more diverse population. Southern Appalachia and the South Carolina Upcountry share a population of deeply religious people who, when confronted with rapid growth and development, often either retreat and resist progress, or find some way to make congruent their newfound prosperity with their religious beliefs. One of the byproducts of integrating progressive secular movements with traditional spiritual values is the insistence that

public schools safeguard the tenets of Christianity. Thus, even in a pluralistic society, school prayer, Bible classes, and Christian values are still incorporated in public schools, and any teaching methods that appear anti-Christian are challenged. And, an ironic element that commonly intrudes in each censorship case, is the labelling of an unwanted teaching method as "New Age religion," thereby calling attention to a violation of the separation of church and state, while ignoring the persistent and ongoing violation of that separation in the illicit use of Christian religious doctrine in school-related activities. By identifying what does not belong to the mainstream or prevailing religion as satanic or New Age, conservative Christians may see an unwanted practice removed because their labelling of it removes the teaching approach from the secular world. Conversely, there seems to be an assumption that the implementation of religious exercises from the dominant church in public school curriculum is unlikely to be challenged. This may, to some degree, explain the persistence of Bible classes within public schools in Clover, SC until 1997. It was only after transplants to the area challenged the legality of the Bible instruction that the classes were moved (although the issue is still partially unresolved); the introduction of activities aligned with humanist thought and inquiry tend to be challenged more rapidly and dealt with surgically.

As Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr. points out in his introduction to Religious Fundamentalism and American Education, Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, geographically a mere thirty miles from York County, SC and philosophically close to the SC Upcountry on many educational issues, the political leader unequivocally allies himself with the ultra-Fundamentalists. In his introduction to Homer Duncan's text on secular humanism (Secular Humanism: The Most Dangerous Religion in America) , the senator argues in behalf of voluntary prayer in public schools and denounces the tenets of humanist movements. Visualization and guided imagery, among a variety of teaching techniques used in the Language Arts classroom, certainly fall under the classification of anti-

Christian values, in ultra-Fundamentalist theory. In the Southern Appalachian study cited earlier, Mary Jean Ronan Herzog notes that English teachers were often "coerced" or "pressured" by parents and school administrators to avoid using innovations such as brainstorming, creative problem solving, and guided imagery (142); critical thinking skills were often discouraged and teachers were subtly advised to teach straight from the book. A statewide Excellence in Education organization in South Carolina (which is, in essence, a conservative group that promotes Christian education), with a strong and vocal branch in the upstate county of York, has certainly exercised its influence at the polls and through networking. I listened to a former Clover, SC (York County) superintendent of schools explain how he would have had problems dealing with a teacher (shown on a video from Columbia) who was trying to teach critical thinking and problem-solving skills via Thoreau's Civil Disobedience. He kept shaking his head and implying that he might have had to dismiss her from his district; clearly, he would not have known how to handle her teaching style.

Yet, while teaching strategies that promote secular humanism have understandably suffered in districts that reflect strong Christian Fundamentalist values, creative visualization or guided imagery would appear to be among the least "harmful" of the so-called "New Age" teaching methods. An NCTE -endorsed Notes Plus article of 1993 encourages English teachers to try out this wonderful tool in the writing classroom, detailing the necessary steps to prompt students to imagine mental images prior to writing descriptive or narrative essays. The lights are extinguished; the students shut their eyes; the teacher tells a story while the students visualize what is going on; the teacher illuminates the room once again; she retells the story while the students jot down notes; and, after some class discussion and/or a relaxation exercise, such as deep breathing, the students begin their writing assignment. It can also be used with a work of literature, in which the teacher

reads from the text as the class listens, eyes closed, picturing the action itself or imagining that they are one of the characters in the short story or novel.

Clearly, this is dangerous material. A technique that has received credibility as an alternative healing method and therapeutic aid dares to assert the power of the mind, threatens traditional practice and implies that healing (or learning) is holistic. As a local graduate student informed me, the teaching of science fiction could be objectionable for him because the genre implies that God is not in control. In turn, guided imagery may be perceived similarly, in that the individual ostensibly operates independently and unreliant upon divine forces and guidance.

Guided imagery has been used with some degree of success in the treatment of certain cancers, auto-immune disorders, hypertension, and a variety of physical and psychological (if the two can, indeed, be separated) disorders. Surgery patients who were taken through guided imagery have been shown to use half the amount of pain medication that those who did not engage in visualization techniques (Davenport "Guided Imagery Gets Respect" 30). For healing purposes, medical technologists employ various types of guided imagery, of which two widely used therapies are known as "scripted" imagery and "receptive" imagery (Davenport 28). It is the former of the two which more closely resembles the method used in the English classroom, as the guide takes the image-maker on a tour of a sentient environment (for stress management) or through the body itself (for cancer treatment), whereas the latter technique focuses on personalized images that represent the patient himself/herself and allow the image-shaper to reclaim forgotten or repressed images that assist in defining the self in its present state. Receptivity is not defined as a passive state, but rather an active one, in which the receptor retrieves dominant images from the past or repressed memory. Further, practitioners claim that visuals are not always necessary to the experience in the medical realm; sound and other sensory receptions may characterize the event.

If the scripted method defines the creative visualization most often used in the English classroom, it is logically the script director who will assume responsibility and praise or blame for the performance. In an essay that celebrates the "discovery" of guided imagery as a classroom technique ("The Promise of Guided Imagery in Education"), Joseph Weinbaum commends practitioners who will assuredly promote scholastic enrichment and cognitive improvement (146) by using this teaching strategy, and he notes that the innovation should prove highly effective in a culture that frequently denies human imagistic potentialities. Students who are continually fed information from a variety of media and stimuli have little opportunity to generate their own ideas and to explore the limits of their imaginations. He argues that the major inherent weakness of guided imagery in the classroom is in the teacher/guide's inability to monitor the visualizing adequately. Unlike the dance instructor or the sports coach, who observes tangible results or actions that follow his/her script, and can thereby adjust succeeding procedures, the writing guide cannot see what his/her students are visualizing and must rely on the learner's ability, verbal skills and motivation as s/he reports the experience ("The Promise of Guided Imagery" 147). Yet, we can refute this argument in that, even though it is impossible to measure the quality of different students' images or to compare them, the evaluative technique or assessment of progress, in the form of the written piece, will be relative to each student's ability, verbal skills, and motivation. And in this product we will actually be able to quantify results, if that is our purpose. Additionally, unlike coaches, Language Arts teachers often engage their students in activities designed to stimulate interest in reading or writing, such as journal writing or free writing, with no immediate accountability for the activity or resulting competition.

Citing numerous studies and her own research, Vera E. Woloshyn indicates that mental imagery improves student performance quantifiably, encouraging the development of

metacognitive skills. Primary school students have increased their spelling ability significantly after mentally imaging target words; middle school students have demonstrated better reading comprehension as a result of the creation of mental images from material they have read; and students in higher education have benefitted from exercises of interactive imagery, expanding their knowledge of geography facts ("Using Mental Imagery in the Classroom: The Need for Explicit Instruction" 148).

While advocates of guided imagery practice in the classroom fear most that inexperienced practitioners will abandon this effective means of developing metacognitive skills because students will not use imagery properly or because they themselves have not had the opportunity to learn guiding techniques from in-services or mentoring, the real threat to the success of creative visualization comes, apparently, not from within. Because guided imagery encourages students to use their own imaginations and because Fundamentalist Christianity frequently takes a dim view of any educational theory that advocates getting inside children's minds (which may cause us to ponder what sort of educational practice does not penetrate the mind), guided imagery has become particularly suspect in areas whose prevailing philosophy is that public schools are antireligious in their promoting of critical-thinking activities. Teaching methods that do not espouse absolute, concrete values that are universally applicable or offer traditional solutions to complex, multi-dimensional problems are labeled "New Age Philosophy" in spirit or cultist in nature. And South Carolina, in which the population has traditionally been homogeneous and the religious dogma overwhelmingly Christian and conservative, undertook to banish the use of guided imagery from statewide curricula.

Bill#3687, which was proposed in the House of Representatives in March, 1991, advocating an amendment to the Code of Laws of South Carolina, 1976, would prohibit the teaching of "New

Age" practices or tenets in public schools. In a preface to the actual proposed bill, the practices were listed as including, but not limited to, progressive relaxation, meditation, visualization, moral relativism, and guided imagery (http://www.lpitr.state.sc.us/bil91--92/3687.htm). Verbalization techniques would exclusively be acceptable in the teaching of higher order thinking and problem solving skills, as mandated by the State Department of Education, and any direct or indirect attempt to influence the subconscious minds of students would be taboo.

In a clause that further defined the heretical practices, visualization was defined as a practice that involved creating an image in the mind and using it to create or control reality through the power of the mind. In defining guided imagery, the creation of images was facilitated by a narrator while the listener/student remained in a "deeply relaxed state, hypnotic state, or altered state of consciousness" (H3687).

In Section 59-29-240, the proposal was expanded to include a laundry list of "mind-altering" teaching or counseling techniques that were unilaterally relegated to the category of practices derived from Eastern mysticism or the occult. One could only envision scores of South Carolina teachers (the majority of whom are middle ground or conservative Christians themselves) putting their unwitting students into a trance and forcing them to enter into altered states of consciousness. And, given the number of teachers who think that many of their adolescent students are already satanic or would undoubtedly engage in the work of the devil if given five minutes of unstructured time in the classroom, it seems unlikely that they would use their classrooms and class time to espouse Eastern philosophies.

Nevertheless, for fear that some of the "different" teachers, as I've often heard some of the more creative educators described, would attempt to engage in alternative teaching practices, the introduction of such aberrant behavior in the South Carolina classroom would, under the provision

of the proposed bill, lead to disciplinary procedures "up to and including dismissal" (H3687), and the advocacy of such practices in teacher education would additionally be prohibited. The ability to curtail academic freedom in the state university system was automatically assumed; the legality of enforcing such a measure would, like some other state laws, be largely ignored.

Although this proposed legislation ultimately failed to win the necessary approval in order to be enacted, the history of its proposal, discussion, and final defeat is noteworthy. The primary sponsor, Representative Fair, from the northwestern South Carolina Greenville/Spartanburg district, has a history of introducing legislation that touches on the relationship between church and state and personal freedoms. He has proposed bills that call for the teaching of creationism alongside evolution in science classrooms, for the removal of a state sales tax on the Holy Bible, and for the involuntary HIV testing of state employees. Bill#3687, co-sponsored by representatives Wright, Corbett, Keegan, and Young, received a favorable report after the first round of discussion and was debated into the following year, when it was finally defeated, on April 7, 1992.

Interestingly, too, a student in my Adolescent Literature class this semester , from the Greenville/Spartanburg district, reported to me that, as a gifted student enrolled in a fine arts program which uses the acronym ARMES, she had the opportunity to participate in a guided imagery exercise, in which the students closed their eyes and imagined that they were snowflakes. The offending instructor was called aside by the program's director, never to return to the class. Significantly, the action occurred early in the summer of 1991, approximately three months after the introduction of Fair's bill.

If Fair's proposed legislation was nothing more than a formal attempt to ban a particular teaching practice or practices, then implicit or explicit censorship has been occurring for a long time in South Carolina. But the intensification of efforts to outlaw creative visualization and

guided imagery appears to coincide with Fair's campaign, the success of which would have legitimized the suppression of a creative and widely endorsed teaching technique. Therefore, while there is a degree of solace to be taken from the bill's failure to pass, there is, as well, a suspicion that, just as South Carolina's ban on interracial marriages has never officially been enforced, though on the books, so certain forms of censorship, though never officially sanctioned, have been put into practice.

Nonetheless, whether stemming from a consciousness of South Carolina's status as the state ranked lowest in education on the national scale, or from a genuine desire to move forward and introduce more progressive teaching practices, a district in upstate South Carolina introduced and wrestled with a program that directly relates to the potential banning of creative visualiztion and related techniques. The ordeal erupted during the discussion and debate over Representative Fair's proposed bill on "New Age" teaching practices, in 1991, and resulted in compromise, causing a number of South Carolinians to examine their involvement in and expectations from public education. It demonstrates the force of community involvement in acceptable and unacceptable teaching practices, the undercurrent of statewide agitation over spiritual and secular values, and the ability of a district to reach a compromise and arrive at a decision that reflects concern for what best serves the students. Were it not for some whispered words from a few of my own students, we would not have known that the crisis had ever occurred.

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